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BRIAN STANLEY

Editorial: Contested Interpretations of Christian Identity

This issue of *Studies in World Christianity* explores some keenly contested and sensitive areas of Christian identity. Yvonne Haddad's and Joshua Donovan's timely article on 'Good Copt, Bad Copt' examines two divergent narratives of contemporary Coptic Christian identity: one, disseminated by vocal elements of the Coptic diaspora and their neo-conservative allies in the United States, focuses on Coptic experiences of persecution in Egypt at the hands of Islamic militants; the other, widely supported by the Coptic hierarchy and by many ordinary Copts in both Egypt and the USA, emphasises the identity of Copts as full citizens of modern Egypt who are determined in partnership with their Muslim co-citizens to find a stable basis for the future of their nation. As alternative 'secular' national and Islamicist visions of the Egyptian nation continue to contest the field on the streets of Cairo and to populate television news bulletins, these rival versions of Christian citizenship in Egypt will doubtless continue to argue their respective claims.

Debates over the appropriate style of Christian citizenship in Muslim-majority states frequently invade the public sphere and can even impinge on questions of foreign policy in the West. Our next two articles, by contrast, are concerned with areas of identity contestation that are only intermittently discussed and are quite often entirely hidden from view within the life of the churches. Francis Machingura explores the plight of women in Zimbabwe who are the victims of male oppression and violence, with particular reference to women living with HIV or AIDS.

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He argues that both indigenous Shona cultural practices, notably the payment of *lobola* (bride-wealth), and New Testament texts, especially those in the first letter to Timothy, have been manipulated by men to reinforce male dominance and to attempt to silence women's voices. For some men, the fact that they have 'purchased' their wives by payment of *lobola* gives them the supposed right to beat them when they fail to give them satisfaction. Machingura's research also suggests that different strands of Zimbabwean Christianity interpret biblical teaching on the role of women in markedly divergent ways, with Apostolic (or African Independent) churches tending to invoke 1 Timothy 2: 11 as requiring the silence of women in the public life of churches, whereas new Pentecostal churches are more likely to appeal to the example of Jesus as one who liberated women from contemporary cultural norms.

Machingura's research in Zimbabwe is borne out on a wider canvas by Elizabeth Koepping's survey of spousal violence among Christians, with particular reference to Ghana, Taiwan and South Australia. Whereas sexual abuse of minors by clergy and others in Christian leadership currently dominates the media and receives the universal condemnation that it deserves, physical abuse of spouses (normally, but not always, of wives) by their Christian partners is rarely highlighted. Koepping's fieldwork suggests that Christian leaders may be reluctant to allow open discussion of the topic or even acknowledge its existence. Women may be persuaded to suffer in silence by the fear of exclusion from the church community for those who are divorced, or divorced and remarried. Both Machingura and Koepping suggest that appeals to essentialist understandings of indigenous culture have become indispensable weapons in the armoury of male domination. Sadly, cultural authenticity is still being invoked to support gross distortions of Christian identity and behaviour. Koepping's article poses the challenge to Christians in all cultural contexts to work out what is involved in faithfully 'incarnating the Gospel', rather than worshipping 'deep-structure cultural idols'.

Our final article, by Chloë Starr, is a review article of Alexander Chow's recently published book, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, and also responds to Chow's article, 'The East Asian Rediscovery of "Sin"', published in the last issue (19.2) of *Studies in World Christianity*. We are delighted that Dr Chow has recently been appointed as a Chancellor's Fellow in World Christianity in the University of Edinburgh; he will be a valuable addition to the staff of the Centre for the Study of World Christianity. One of the key issues

raised by the conversation between Chow and Starr is what role theological construction has to play in shaping what it means to be authentically Christian, this time in an East Asian–Confucian, and specifically Chinese, cultural environment. Chow argues that the Orthodox theological tradition offers promise for the development of a more Sino-centric Christian theology; the question Starr raises is how in practice this might happen, given the absence of Orthodox churches in China. We hope that the pages of this journal will continue to be a forum in which such contested questions of Christian identity can be explored.